

Prime Minister

Mr Fowler accepts the need for some form of public enquiry over test-tube babies, etc. He suggests the attached reply to Mrs Williams, acknowledging this but leaving the details for later. MAP 24/2

Prime Minister

POSSIBLE ENQUIRY INTO MEDICAL ETHICS

In her letter of 10 February to you, Mrs Williams is suggesting a Royal Commission on medical ethics to consider the issues arising from in vitro fertilisation and other recent advances in medical techniques. Leo Abse is making a similar case. A note on the issues is attached. The Department's position until now has been that it was best to have the views of the medical bodies concerned - the General Medical Council, the British Medical Association, the Medical Research Council and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists - before reaching conclusions on the nature of any wider enquiry. My officials have written to these bodies stressing the need for urgency but, given the nature of the issues, it is unlikely that formal responses will be forthcoming for some months. But the fact is that the issues go way beyond purely medical questions, and involve much wider considerations, as well as very specific and detailed legal problems. It may well be, therefore, that further action should not wait on these bodies: there are indications that the profession themselves share this view.

I have asked my officials to prepare advice on the form that a wider enquiry might take, and on its scope. If some form of committee is established, there will undoubtedly be pressure from some sources for it to consider questions such as the care of severely handicapped babies or to look at wider issues such as abortion. It is therefore important that we think carefully about precisely what type of body might be set up, and about terms of reference.

For the present, therefore, I suggest a holding reply to Mrs Williams along the lines of the attached draft. I hope to have more specific proposals for colleagues to consider within the next three or four weeks. Meanwhile, I am copying this minute to the Lord Chancellor,



the Lord President, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster,  
the Home Secretary, the Secretaries of State for Education,  
Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the Attorney General,  
the Lord Advocate and the Paymaster General.

20 February 1982

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DRAFT LETTER FROM PM TO SHIRLEY WILLIAMS

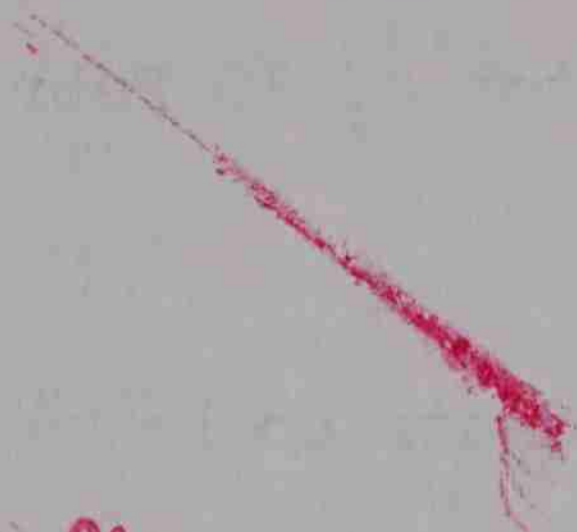
Thank you for your letter of 10 February about issues of medical ethics.

Recent medical developments do have far reaching implications and the Government has already sought the views of the British Medical Association, the Medical Research Council, the General Medical Council and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists on the specific question of in vitro fertilisation.

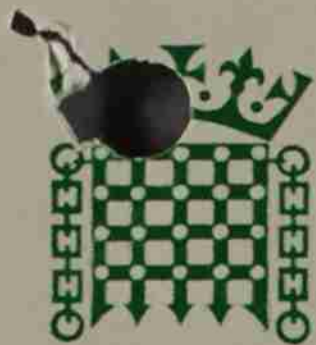
Because these issues are of more general public concern, I have already indicated, in my reply to Mr Leo Abse on 10 February, that the Government will consider whether a wider examination is required. Both the scope and the form of such an examination need careful thought and we are considering these questions urgently.

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From: Rt Hon Shirley Williams MP



HOUSE OF COMMONS

LONDON SW1A 0AA

10 February 1982

Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher MP  
10 Downing Street  
SW1

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Dear Prime Minister,

I would like to support the arguments that are being put to you for a commission on medical ethics,

The recent developments in embryology, genetic engineering and replacement surgery engender a whole series of critical questions to be resolved in the field of medical ethics and law. The nature of the family, of inheritance and even of individual identity are not least among these questions.

In 1972, I was privileged to be a member of a working party sponsored by the British Association for the Advancement of Science, chaired by Walter Bodmer, now Professor of Genetics at the University of Oxford. The working group produced a study which was published under the title of 'Our Future Inheritance: Choice or Chance' published in 1974 by Oxford University Press, which explored the ethical issues arising even at that early stage from the advances of the biological sciences and of medical technology.

I believe that legitimate public concern would justify a Royal Commission on this range of issues. The lack of guidelines, indeed even of clear legal definitions, is disturbing to the public and the professions alike. A commission would enable those with varying knowledge and experience to contribute to a significant assessment of the issues and to make recommendations for the future - and its members should be drawn not only from scientists and the medical profession, but also from those with understanding of the law, theology and education. The commission would need to consider how far our traditional values and codes of behaviour remain relevant in the face of these new scientific and technological developments.

I hope you will give the proposal your careful consideration.

Yours sincerely  
A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Shy Williams'.

SHIRLEY WILLIAMS